

ADELANTE

Unlocking the Door

BY ALBERT GONZALES

Knowledge is power. For young Latino men especially, knowledge of the Federal requirement to register with Selective Service is the power to realize dreams and goals of success.

On the other hand, lack of knowledge can cripple a young man. He should know, for example, that many important benefits and privileges are conditioned to registering with Selective Service. They include student loans, federal jobs, and citizenship. I think there are three



reasons too many young Latino men are losing those benefits and privileges.

The first reason, as I said, is not knowing about the requirement. The second reason is knowing about the requirement but not understanding it. It's the unfounded fear that registration will lead to military service or deportation. The third reason is the prospect of taking one's claim for deferment or exemption before an all-Anglo draft board. That shouldn't make a difference, but in the

real world perceptions are important.

I appreciate this chance to set the record straight. We recently celebrated Columbus Day, an annual reminder of the Hispanic discovery of this continent. Since then, Hispanic men and women have enriched the cultural heritage of this nation and served with honor and distinction in the Armed Forces. As the National Commander of the American GI Forum, I have good reason to know how bravely and faithfully Hispanic veterans have served this nation. The young Latino man has every reason to love his country. Registration with Selective Service is another way to show it. It's the last link between the Armed Forces and the society they protect.

Three of the last four directors of Selective Service, including my good friend and the current incumbent, Lawrence G. Romo, are Hispanic. That will tell readers of this magazine how important Latino outreach is to Selective Service.

But first, the young Latino man needs to know that if he is living in this country he has to register, citizen or not. He needs to know that he should register within 30 days of his 18th birthday, and certainly before his 26th birthday, after which it's too late.

High school is where most young men find out about the

registration requirement. But what if the Latino immigrant went to high school in his original country and came here at the age of 20? How else would he learn about the law? It isn't exactly a common topic of talk on the street. And even if it were, what if his English skills were still poor? He probably wouldn't understand Selective Service posters if he saw them, or understand Selective Service radio spots if he heard them.

And then there are several fatal misperceptions. Registration does not mean military service. Military service in the United States has been 100 percent voluntary since 1973. Registration provides a data base of names in case of a future dire emergency. It's an insurance policy against being caught unprepared for a crisis. Nothing more, nothing less.

Worse yet is the fear that registration will attract the attention of the U.S. Department of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, formerly INS), and open the door to deportation. A common reaction is to keep a low profile and register for nothing. Selective Service does not share its data with immigration officials. In fact, it couldn't even if it wanted to. Registration requires the basic information. Name, date of birth, current address. It's even possible to register without a Social Security Number, although the registrant should add that to his file once he receives it. There is nothing on any Selective Service form which identifies the registrant's residency status.

Selective Service concentrates on its mission to prepare for a future draft, however unlikely that possibility is today. Having learned its lessons from the Vietnam War era, it knows that if Congress ever authorizes a draft in the future, it will have to be a fair and equitable draft, and to be perceived as such by the general population. That's especially true for the Latino population, which is now the most important minority in the U.S. Part of that fairness and equity would deal with tightening deferments and making every young man equally at risk of induction.

Who would decide who gets deferments and exemptions? Local boards. The claimant for a deferment or exemption would have no confidence in the process unless he felt his case were decided by his neighbors and peers. That's why the local boards of Selective Service reflect the communities they serve. Common sense and fairness dictate that local boards in, say, San Antonio, El Paso, or Miami should be proportionately Latino. And yes, women bring their own fresh and unique perspective. There's a role for women on local boards, too. I write to appeal to influential Latinos everywhere. Find out if there is a vacancy on your local board. Apply yourself, and ask civic-minded friends to apply. You'll find the information link (<http://www.sss.gov/BM.htm>) on the Selective Service web site.

Registration is quick, it's easy, and it's the law. It's such a small step. Keys and keyholes are small, too, but they unlock doors. Registration with Selective Service is the door to full participation in the greatest nation on earth.

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